

A FEW WORDS

ON

LABOUR AND WAGES:

ADDRESSED TO THE

WORKING-CLASSES OF MANCHESTER.

BY THOMAS GREIG.

"THE LABOURER IS WORTHY OF HIS HIRE."

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A FEW WORDS ON LABOUR & WAGES.

FELLOW-WORKERS,

IN thus addressing you, I wish it to be kept in view, that Masters and Servants are both workers: to the former belong mental and manual labour, with a degree of bodily exertion which are often greater than are imposed upon the latter. Clear however it is, that each depend upon the other. Masters cannot do without workmen, nor workmen without masters. And it is one of the prevailing errors of the age that their permanent interests, which are identical, should be too frequently viewed by both as being immediately antagonistic, thereby causing the one to look upon the other with no slight feelings of jealousy, and erecting a barrier against that friendly recognition and social intercourse which is not incompatible with due subordination and proper control. I feel assured, that a little kind attention from a master is very frequently, if not always attended with beneficial results, inasmuch as it tends to induce in the workman feelings of self-respect, greater circumspection in conduct, and general elevation of character. It is surely for the interest of the employer to have steady and well-informed workmen, able and willing to earn a decent livelihood by honest labour, and to his comfort to be surrounded by a contented, happy, sober, and industrious people, evidencing the truth of Scripture—"That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer all the members suffer with it."

I have perused with unmingled feelings of delight a small pamphlet from the pen of the REV. HUGH STOWELL, entitled "A Plea for the Working-man: do not lower his Wages; addressed to Employers." As an employer, most cordially do I agree with the sentiments uttered and principles therein set forth, and most sin-

cerely do I join in expressing deep sympathy with the working-classes who during a period of unparalleled distress have endured unexampled privations ; and yet, under the severest of trials, have been enabled by the grace of God, to bear up with a degree of patience, fortitude and magnanimity altogether unequalled. I hail the introduction of the address at this time as the harbinger of great good to this manufacturing district, as it awakens attention to the important subject of wages ; and the question being brought before the public on the grand principles of Christian duty, it cannot, it must not slumber. The present appeal gives an opportunity to all who are so disposed to bear testimony in support of these principles, and to lend their aid in a more practical manner—*by keeping up the price of labour.*

It is generally said, and I believe with truth, that the great majority of employers are opposed to the reduction of wages, and only adopt the course in self-defence. Far from wishing to oppress their workmen, they shew a deep interest both for their temporal and spiritual welfare. It is therefore greatly to be lamented that the few—the small minority (which is the exception) should really establish the rule. It cannot be denied but that there are employers whose chief study is to reduce the wages of their workmen ; to produce the largest possible amount of work, for the least possible amount of payment ; pressing into their service their every energy and spare moment of time which they ought to have for mental and moral improvement, as if man had no higher destiny than to work, to eat, and to sleep. Need we wonder that such treatment leads to suspicion, jealousy and warfare betwixt employers and employed ; the former taking every advantage in bad times to oppress the latter, and the latter by turn-outs and other means in good times endeavouring to concuss the former ; thus engendering the worst feelings of human nature, and bringing in its train dissatisfaction, disaffection, distrust and hatred. So far as my knowledge extends, observation proves that it is not those masters who pursue this system that are most prosperous. Whether this arises from getting inferior workmen, whether the workmen feel degraded by becoming what is generally termed “knobsticks,” which must induce carelessness in the performance of their work, or whether they rob their employers to eke out a subsistence, I cannot say ; but such I believe to be the fact. View the result of a reduction of wages. One employer reduces wages to get an advantage over his neighbour ; this reduction becomes general ;

and who benefits by it? Another reduction is had recourse to, and again followed by others, so that no advantage accrues to the original reducer or to those who follow him; for so soon as it is known, they have to submit to a reduction in the price of goods manufactured greater than that they have made in wages; and in the end, both employers and employed are losers. Thus it is, while you may listen to one and another lamenting the course adopted by some to reduce wages, still few will venture to raise their voice or lift the pen in defence of the hard toiled workman. Many are there, however, who looking to the immediate circumstances of the working-man, will tell you with great compassion how much they feel for his sad condition, and end by saying, better half a loaf than none, wishing that he should earn this half-loaf by accepting lower wages, or in other words, submit to a reduction of half his wages. I am free to own, that I hold no sympathy with such a conclusion; although in doing so I am aware that I subject myself to the *douch* of the hydropathic economist, who after giving a thorough drenching, will send me to ADAM SMITH to study the principles of political economy, and conclude by advancing the generally received axiom, that "wages are regulated by supply and demand." People are too apt in the present day to be carried away by a mere phrase; and I know of none which is more frequently used for deceptive purposes than that now quoted; it passes currently as gold coin, incapable of admixture with baser metal; it is therefore necessary, in submitting it to the test, that the base metal should be entirely separated and exhibited *per se*. And in many instances it will be found that the very reasons assigned for a reduction should be those brought forward for an advance of wages. In some departments the workman is paid by the day or time employed, and is thus called *day's work*; in other by the quantity produced, and is termed *piece work*. We should naturally conclude, that in bad times, or during a period of commercial depression, it were hard enough upon the workman, who averaging six months' employment in the year, or half-production, should be paid with half wages. This, however, he does not complain of; he does not demand wages for work he does not perform; neither does he seek to be employed unless his employer can do so to his own benefit. *And this is the great hardship of the workman's case.* He not only works shorter time, and thereby receives diminished wages, but he is required to submit to a reduction of the price paid; be it for the

day, the lb. or the hank, &c.; and it is to the latter alone, in common phraseology, that reduction in wages is applied. And although wages are diminished by working short time, it is never deemed a reduction by the workman. In discussing the question, this distinction should be kept in view.

ADAM SMITH, when writing in the year 1775, says—"What are the common wages of labour depends everywhere upon the contract usually made between those two parties whose interests are by no means the same. The workmen desire to get as much, the masters to give as little as possible. The former are disposed to combine in order to raise, the latter in order to lower the wages of labour. It is not, however, difficult to foresee which of the two parties must, upon all ordinary occasions, have the advantage. The masters, being fewer in number, can combine much more easily; and the law, besides, authorizes, or at least does not prohibit their combinations, while it prohibits those of the workman. We have no acts of parliament against combining to lower the price of work; but many against combining to raise it." (These acts are now repealed.) "In all such disputes the masters can hold out much longer." He then adds—"We rarely hear it has been said of the combination of masters, though frequently of those of workmen. But whoever imagines upon this account that masters rarely combine, is as ignorant of the world as of the subject. Masters are always and everywhere in a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform combination not to raise the wages of labour above their actual rate. To violate this combination is everywhere a most unpopular action, and a sort of reproach to a master among his neighbours and equals. We seldom indeed hear of this combination, because it is the usual, and one may say the natural state of things which nobody ever hears of. Masters too, sometimes enter into particular combinations to sink the wages of labour even below this rate."

The foregoing extracts clearly prove that masters exercised a control over the wages of labour, and selfishness was as rampant in those days as in the present. And I infer that the writer did not approve of the course pursued. He distinctly states that—"A man must always live by his work, and his wages must at least be sufficient to maintain him. They must even upon most occasions be somewhat more." And his meaning is better carried out by the following paragraph. "The liberal reward of labour, therefore, as it

“is the necessary effect, so it is the natural symptom of increasing national wealth. The scanty maintenance of the labouring poor on the other hand, is the natural symptom that things are at a stand; and their starving condition, that they are going fast backwards.” One other quotation will suffice. After stating—“The common complaint that luxury extends itself, even to the lowest ranks of the people, and that the labouring poor will not now be contented with the same food, clothing and lodging which satisfied them in former times,” he concludes—“Is this improvement in the circumstances of the lower ranks of the people to be regarded as an advantage or as an inconvenience to society? The answer seems at first sight abundantly plain. Servants, labourers, workmen of different kinds, make up the greater part of every great political society. But what improves the circumstances of the greater part can never be regarded as an inconvenience to the whole. No society can surely be flourishing and happy of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but *equity*; besides, that they who feed, clothe and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed and lodged.” From these copious extracts, we learn that there has been a disposition on the part of employers from an early period, considering the introduction of manufactures into this country, to reduce the wages of labour; and looking to their own immediate interests, “oppressed the hireling in his wages,” and stand equally condemned with those legislators who framed laws for their exclusive benefit, to the injury of the community at large, which laws are now (to the honour and welfare of the nation) being discarded from the statute book; and thus the conduct of those masters who tyrannise over their servants, and grind down their wages, deserves the severest reprobation. There is something paltry and mean in those who are powerful taking advantage of the weak to oppress them.

We are told by the most able writers of the day, that the laws of political economy are the laws of nature, and by going one step further, we add, that the laws of nature are the laws of GOD; and it is our duty to trace His will as exhibited in the laws of nature with His revealed will as given to us in His Word; the one must be in unison with the other; His work in nature must be in accordance with His requirements of man. The golden rule is—“Do unto others

as ye would they should do unto you ;” and who will deny, that—
 “In the kingdom of nature wise laws are ordained conducive to the purity, peace and prosperity of social life, and to the best interests of each individual soul.”

There may be individuals willing to admit that there is some truth in what is here written ; but still they will be puzzled to get over the oft repeated maxim—“supply and demand must and will regulate wages.” To such, I say, substitute “profits” for “wages,” and follow out the argument urged upon the working-man to labour for less wages than will support him ; and see the result gazetted in fearful numbers of bankrupt manufacturers, &c. The workmen are now sensible that it is better for employers to stop their works than to carry on to a loss, for it must come to an end sooner or later ; and how many misfortunes do we hear of during the last twelve months being attributable to manufacturing goods, and selling them at ruinous prices. Tradesmen should not overstock an already glutted market, but act as a skilful physician does with the human frame. He doubtless would feel surprise if when called in to see his patient in a state of satiety, he found the surgeon cramming him turkey-like, or the homeopathist administering infinitesimal doses to his servants to cure their master.

The remedy I should propose is for workmen to wait upon their employers, and ascertain from them whether or not they are disposed to pay proper wages ; and when they have obtained the sanction of (I hope) the great majority, they can say to those employers who attempt to reduce wages, such a course is unjust towards us your workmen, and unjust towards other employers, who are paying higher wages.

We have more to dread from home than foreign competition. Our superiority in manufactures is admitted by all countries, and proved by the tenacity with which they cling to prohibitory tariffs, and high duties. The appliances of modern science and art, the great mechanical knowledge displayed in our manufactories, joined to the indefatigable energy of the national character must enable Britain for many years to maintain the ascendancy ; the more especially as duties on the raw materials are now repealed, and free-trade in corn will soon come into operation.

It is much to be regretted, that employers are attempting to evade the ten-hours’ Factory Act ; some by relays of hands, others

by adult males, and extending the labour to *twelve, thirteen*, and even *fourteen* hours a-day, discharging young persons and women. This course must recoil upon themselves at no very distant period. I am no advocate for legislative interference betwixt master and servant, and should rejoice to have seen this *act of humanity* carried out without an act of parliament, which might easily have been accomplished. If however, employers should shew indifference to the social comfort, well-being, and improvement of the working classes, it is only right that they should be protected by a parliamentary enactment.

There does not exist in my mind a doubt but this act, so much condemned, will prove beneficial for both masters and servants. Employment will be more regular and continuous, which will rectify a great evil arising from persons being employed long hours at some periods, and entirely without employment at others. It might be well for those who dwell so largely upon natural laws to inform us, whether it is natural that workmen should be employed day and night; and because it is a law in nature that the Sun shall give light, and water flow down the stream, *they* must make laws that man shall be employed in such a manner that neither a ray of light from the one, nor a drop of the other shall be lost.

Let it be borne in mind that man is a compound being, having both body and soul; that while the bodily frame is fitted for labour, and by the decree of God, "man shall eat bread in the sweat of his face," the spirit should be exercised on higher acquirements; for "man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."

THOMAS GREIG.

CORNBROOK PARK,
JULY 4TH, 1848.

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